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History: Seymour Attman was such a fixture at his Lombard Street deli that city officials have named a street after him.

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BODY:

For more than six decades, Seymour Attman toiled to make the best corned beef sandwiches in Baltimore. And yesterday, the city he served gave him a place on its map.

Breaking their policy on naming streets in honor of people, city officials unveiled "Seymour Attman's Way" at a sidewalk celebration yesterday in which dignitaries and everyday Baltimoreans recalled the brisket-making prowess of the late venerable delicatessen owner.

It is here at Attman's Delicatessen, where Seymour Attman spent every working day of his life behind the counter, that generations have descended on East Lombard Street to order sandwiches ranging from the Seymour Special to the Tongue Fu (yes, it has tongue in it).

"As you can tell, I've been eating the corned beef sandwiches since I was a small child," said Rep. Benjamin L. Cardin, a Baltimore Democrat who was among the 75 people attending the ceremony on Baltimore's Corned Beef Row.

Family and friends said putting Seymour Attman's Way on the city map -- a new road connecting East Lombard and East Pratt streets within walking distance of President Street -- was just the right way to honor a Russian Jewish immigrant's son who cared about the neighborhood's past and future.

Gilbert Sandler, who writes about city history, said yesterday that Attman's delicatessen represents a last link to a time in the 1930s and '40s when the block was the bustling center of Baltimore Jewish social life. The B'nai Israel synagogue on Lloyd Street is around the corner. Stone's -- a now-closed bakery next door to Attman's -- lives on in many memories. And few can forget the live chickens on display in the block, which were slaughtered on-site according to kosher dictates.

The chickens "would splatter blood, while the sign said, 'Chickens Killed While You Relax,' " Sandler said yesterday. "This was the Eastern European shtetl (village) transplanted, churning with so many people you couldn't walk on the sidewalk. It was a carnival, it was so exciting."

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Attman, who lived through the Depression as a boy and died last year at 76, "was the living embodiment of all that," Sandler said. "Yiddish culture -- food, music, praying, camaraderie -- he mixed all that between two slices of bread."

A courtly man who liked to say, "Work and be happy," Attman spoke with children at the store counter as easily as adults. Two men Attman befriended when they were boys, longtime deli manager Earl G. Oppel Jr. and state Sen. Nathaniel J. McFadden, were instrumental in persuading Mayor Martin O'Malley to name the new street after Attman.

In reaction to a deluge of street signs named after Baltimoreans in recent years, O'Malley instituted a freeze on the practice. But in Attman's case, the mayor made an exception.

"What good is mayoral prerogative if you can't suspend a moratorium?" O'Malley quipped to the crowd.

McFadden, 57, grew up in the Flag House Courts public housing high-rise, which overshadowed the East Lombard Street block for several decades until it was demolished in 2000. At age 12, McFadden recalled, he was one of the first black people to get a job in the block -- cleaning out the chicken stalls. Attman encouraged him to aspire to greater heights and pursue college and a career.

"He was one of the greatest, gentlest, nicest persons I ever met in my life," McFadden said. "When so many businesses left, Mr. Seymour Attman had a commitment to this city."

Oppel said Attman called him "Junior" until he was 35 years old.

"Every day I still talk to him and ask for his guidance. Everything I know, I learned a lot from him," Oppel said as he looked at the new street, carved out in a flattened area east of President Street.

Attman held fast to his deli through the ups and downs of city life -- such as the white flight and racial strife of the 1960s -- because, family members said, he was happiest when he was minding the store.

The plan was to leave the business to his youngest son Stuart, family members said. But that dream ended when Stuart Attman drowned on a Jamaica vacation in 1994, leaving his father devastated. The Stuart Attman Kibitz Room, where customers can chat and where Seymour Attman liked to keep an eye on things, is named after his youngest son.

Recently, Marc Attman, an optometrist, stepped into the proprietor's role in the store started by his grandfather in 1915. He knew his father was serious about the store's legacy when, toward the end of his life, he revealed the seasonings in the corned beef recipe.

In Marc Attman's view, his ebullient father lived the American dream. "He had the whole American personality savvy," he said. "Outgoing and opinionated, wanted the best of everything."

The demolition of the Flag House housing complex is a ray of hope for a city district that borders Little Italy, the Flag House & Star-Spangled Banner Museum and a new museum of African-American history under construction. Part of a Clinton administration "Hope 6" initiative to replace outmoded public high-rises in America's inner cities, the new housing is mixed use. Market-rate townhouses will be side-by-side with subsidized public housing and retail space in a village-like setting.

Groundbreaking for the 337-unit Flag House redevelopment is scheduled for next week -- a fact that is bittersweet, said some in Attman's circle.

"He had a vision of seeing Lombard Street return to its heyday," Oppel said. "It's sad he died before it happened, but it is going to happen."

GRAPHIC: Photo(s), 1. Eileen Levine and Marc Attman, children of the late Seymour Attman, and Mayor Martin

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O'Malley unveil a new street named after the delicatessen owner, whose shop on East Lombard Street became a Baltimore institution.; 2. Seymour Attman's father opened the family delicatessen in 1915. The younger Attman ran the Baltimore institution until his death last year at age 76.; 3. Marc Attman now runs the delicatessen where his father spent years behind the counter serving loyal customers.; 4. Lombard Street's Corned Beef Row, circa 1939, looking east toward Central Avenue. Attman's Delicatessen is at right.; 5. State. Sen. Nathaniel McFadden, about Seymour Attman, left, shown at his deli in 2001.; 1. - 3. DOUG KAPUSTIN : SUN STAFF PHOTOS; 4. FILE PHOTO; 5. SUN STAFF : 2001

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